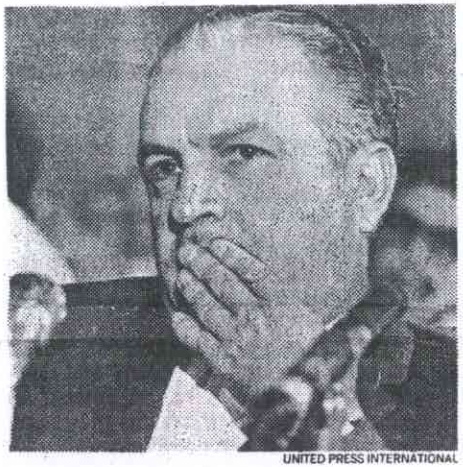


UNITED PRESS INTERNATIONAL

Carlos Marcello, who Ragano claims engineered the Kennedy assassination.

ASSOCIATED PRESS

Teamsters boss Jimmy Hoffa hated JFK, Ragano claims, so Kennedy's murder was a way for Trafficante and Marcello to gain access to the union's huge pension fund.

CONFESSION OF A DEAD MAFIA BOSS

Mob Lawyer Frank Ragano Says He Knows Who Killed JFK

By Jeffrey A. Frank
Washington Post Staff Writer

This is the age of confession, an era of dragging oneself through the mud; abusers and abusees compete in the marketplace of self-abnegation. Which is why it seems inevitable that a place be set for Frank Ragano, a man whose chief claim to fame is a long career as "house counsel" to the mob.

But in this time of revealed secrets, Frank Ragano claims to possess one of the best. He says he knows who killed President Kennedy. He says he knows why. And he says he knows all this because one of the plotters told him.

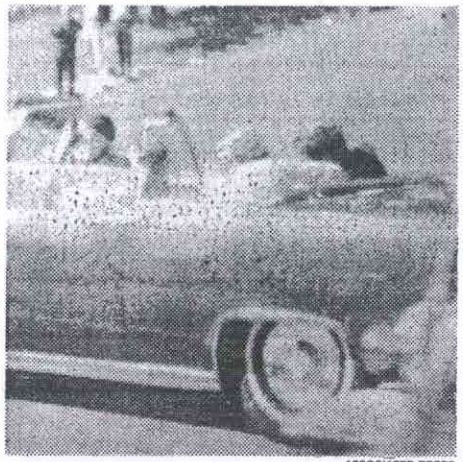
Sure, sure, you've heard this one before. And Ragano's alleged source doesn't make his claim easier to believe. It is, after all, Santo Trafficante Jr., the powerful Florida Mafia boss, whose death seven years ago prevents him from denying his role.

Ragano is a short 71-year-old with wispy, reddish hair, and he is talking in a restaurant at the Mayflower because he has written a sort of Godfather Dearest, "Mob Lawyer," in which he recounts years of serving organized crime. His clientele included the very vanished Teamster boss Jimmy Hoffa (killed by the mob in 1975), but *número uno* was Trafficante, whose line of work included *bolita*, a numbers game, drug trafficking and a big interest in Havana's pre-Castro gambling casinos. The mob made Ragano very rich—and very circumspect. Of Trafficante, he says, "I think if I'd been inquisitive, curious—I think as soon I was no longer any use to him—he'd have me killed."

But that was then. Ragano says that when Trafficante vouchsafed the historic news about JFK's murder seven years ago, it came as a sort of deathbed admission. The mobster confessed, Ragano says, as they drove through the streets of Tampa on March 13, 1987—four days before Trafficante died. The exact date is important because there is an argument as to whether Trafficante actually made the trip from Miami.

If Trafficante did not, Ragano's story falls apart, which is why his every word is being challenged by the

See RAGANO, E2, Col. 1

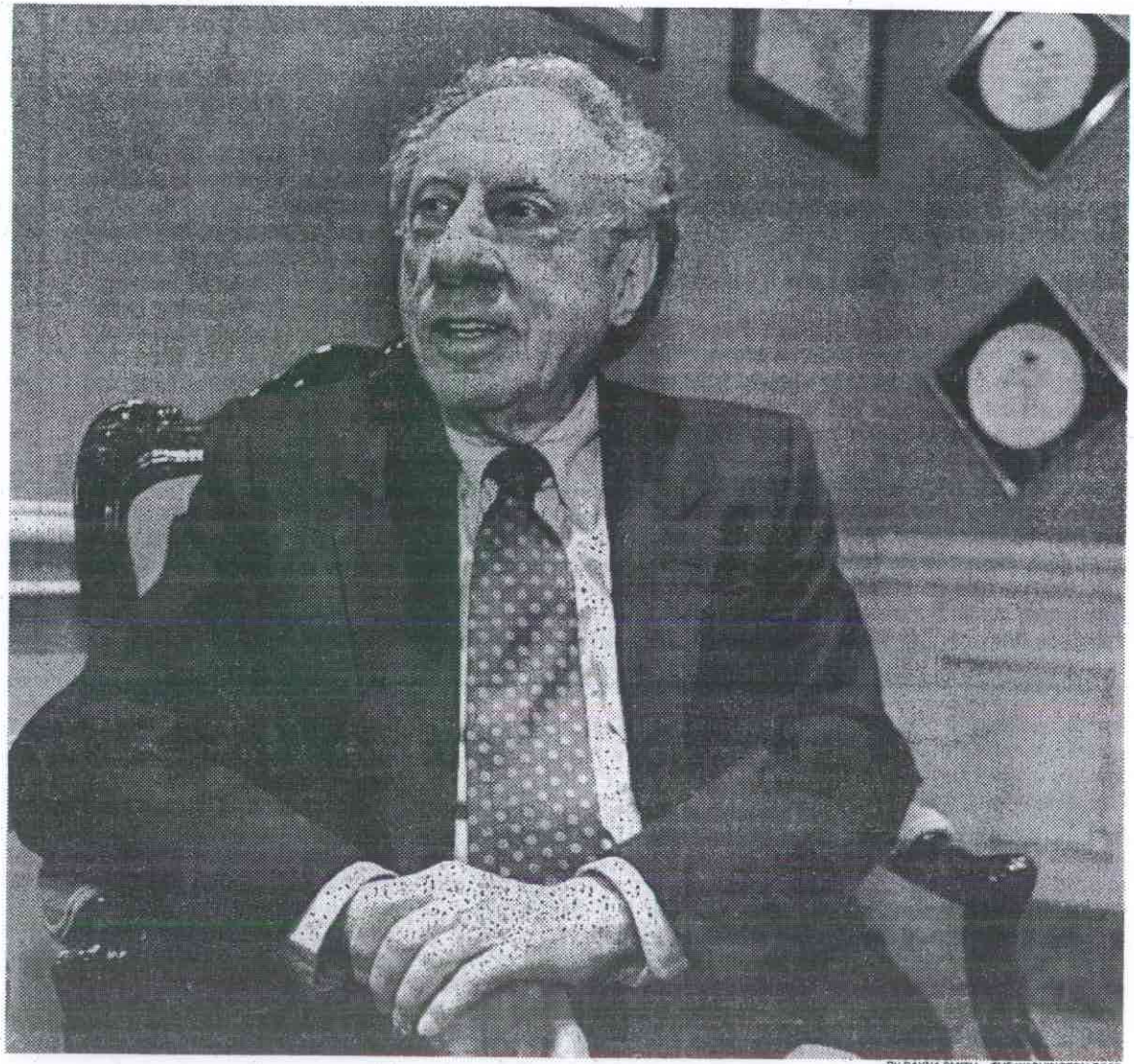


ASSOCIATED PRESS

President Kennedy slumps over after being hit by an assassin's bullet in Dallas.

THE WASHINGTON POST

Trafficante before a hearing of the House Select Committee on Assassinations in 1977



BY DAYNA SMITH—THE WASHINGTON POST

Frank Ragano says a dying Santo Trafficante confessed to the assassination of President Kennedy: "He was a sick man. And I think maybe he owed me something. It could very well be that he didn't think I'd say anything about it."

Mob Lawyer

RAGANO, From E1

dead mobster's family, who insist that Trafficante was too ill to travel. To which Ragano says, "If they are sincere in their contentions that he was not here in Tampa on that Friday the 13th, I would suggest that they file a lawsuit so this issue can be settled by a court of law."

Not bloody likely.

'Carlos Messed Up'

The theory that the mob killed JFK has had many devotees. The House Assassination Committee came to that tentative conclusion in 1979, 15 years after the Warren Commission said that one lone nut killed the president. The House committee singled out Trafficante and New Orleans Mafia chieftain Carlos Marcello, who died in 1992.

Ragano, to be sure, has no proof. But his testimony is rich in detail, right down to the words allegedly spoken, in Sicilian, by the dying Trafficante as they drove around Tampa: *"Carlos e futtutu. Non duvevamu ammazzar a Giovanni. Duvevamu ammazzari a Bobby."* ("Carlos [Marcello] messed up. We shouldn't have killed Giovanni [John]. We should have killed Bobby.")

How does a person react to discovering who was behind the crime of the century?

"I didn't know how to deal with it," Ragano says earnestly; his Florida drawl sounds incongruous in a world of Sicilian confidences. "As a lawyer. As a human being. As an old friend. I just didn't know how to deal with it." He turns to Nancy Ragano, who has been girlfriend and wife for 30 years. "I didn't tell her for a while," he says, "and she kept asking me, 'What's wrong, what's bothering you?' "

"Frank was very disturbed for about two weeks there," says Nancy Ragano, who sounds like the Florida coed she was when she met the mob lawyer. "I thought maybe it was Santo's death."

"When you find that a man you know is responsible for the president's death, my God . . . ." says Frank Ragano.

". . . —the godfather to my son," says Nancy Ragano, "and those are not nice things to hear."

As the Raganos talk on, it is suddenly a most peculiar Washington moment. This conversation has been taking place in a quiet corner of a restaurant in the hotel where, years before, Ragano had lunch with Hoffa—and where J. Edgar Hoover regularly lunched with his deputy, Clyde Tolson, and where, Ragano says, he once saw Hoffa and Hoover greet each other. On this bright spring day, two tables away, sits former CIA chief Richard Helms, who served as deputy director of plans after the Bay of Pigs fiasco —a time when the CIA tried to hire Trafficante and the mob to kill Fidel Castro. Ragano does not recognize Helms, who occasionally looks his way.

Ragano is trying to figure out why Trafficante told him:

"If somebody was to tell me why did Santo tell you about it, I don't know anybody else he could have told. I was close to him for 27 years. He was a sick man. And I think maybe he owed me something." Ragano pauses. "It could very well be that he didn't think I'd say anything about it."

A Meeting in Tampa?

Then there is the view that Ragano is making all this up, which is what Trafficante's widow and daughters say, while lamenting that their children and grandchildren must bear the stigma.

Mary Jo Trafficante Paniella says by telephone that her

BY DAYNA SMITH—THE WASHINGTON POST

Frank Ragano with wife Nancy. He claims Mafia boss Santo Trafficante told him the mob killed President Kennedy.

father was at Miami's Mercy Hospital on March 12 and March 14, and family lawyer Henry Gonzalez, by fax, produces hospital records to show that Trafficante received dialysis treatments on those days. "One thing we do remember is the week my father died," says the 54-year-old Paniella, who teaches elementary school. "When [Ragano] named a date and said he was with my father, we said, 'How can he say this?' "

It's easy, Ragano says, because Santo Trafficante was not in the hospital on March 13, 1987. Ragano carries with him a March 19, 1987 Tampa Tribune story in which Ragano says he talked with Trafficante on March 13 about his medical options.

At the suggestion that Ragano might have made his historic confession by phone, Ragano says Trafficante was so fearful of being bugged that he'd carry a pocketful of quarters for pay phones. "To suggest for a moment he would be talking to me about the murder of a president over a telephone, that's beyond comprehension."

If he has witnesses that the two met in Tampa, who are they? asks Paniella.

Ragano says he has three—but won't produce them. "One guy is afraid of retaliation. The other guys are two doctors, who say they'll testify if they're summoned to court."

Then Ragano says, "I did not see the two daughters in [Trafficante's Tampa] house that Friday. The one person I saw was his widow, and she's not making any claims or denials at all."

Ragano is wrong about that. "That's a big, big lie," says the 74-year-old Josie Trafficante by telephone. "My husband was too sick to fly anywhere. If he had to travel, I had to take him in a car, because he had that colostomy bag."

"In view of the terrible things that I've said about her late husband in our book, and knowing her as I do," Ragano responds later, "I'm not at all surprised that she would parrot the claims of her two daughters."

Of herself and her 50-year-old sister, Sarah Ann Trafficante Valdez, Mary Jo Paniella says, "Our children have this burden to bear. They'll have this all their lives because he decided to write a novel."

"This book was not written to make me look good," says Ragano. "It makes me look terrible."

That is one Ragano statement that no one will dispute.

'Rank Self-Deception'

Ragano's coauthor is Selwyn Raab, a New York Times reporter who has covered the Mafia for two decades. Raab's brief narrative is set apart from Ragano's, and occasionally he takes his writing partner to task. "Frank's refusal to consider the evidence of Trafficante's ties to the Mafia was rank self-deception for a lawyer trained to be logical," he writes at one point.

Not only does Raab scold Ragano, but Ragano scolds himself. His memoir is filled with quotidian humiliation, such as the night that Trafficante ordered Ragano to solicit the favors of a cigarette girl at a Miami bar.

The worst happened on the night of Nov. 22, 1963, when the future Nancy Ragano, then 19, walked into a Tampa hotel bar to find Trafficante exulting, "The son-of-a-bitch is dead." Ragano's glass, she says, was raised in a toast.

"I have to tell you," she says, almost angrily, "I'm not so sure I've ever forgiven Frank for that night."

Wait a minute, says Mary Jo Paniella. An FBI surveillance report proves that her father was in Miami that night. Ragano says that Trafficante routinely misled the FBI.

"I think that was the night I made my pact with the devil," says Ragano, "sitting there like an idiot, toasting the death of the president."

More humiliations were to come: conviction for tax fraud in the early 1980s, his law practice suspended and finally, last year, a prison sentence, of which he served 10 months. At age 70, Ragano was broke and without a livelihood. Through the worst of it, in the mid-'80s, his old friends shunned him—even Trafficante, although the mobster eventually reconciled with his former "house counsel."

"Here's a guy, I thought we were closer than brothers," Ragano says, "and when I was in trouble, Santo turned his back on me. How coldblooded can you get?"

A Favor for *Marteduzzo*

Some students of the Kennedy murder, such as the indefatigable Harold Weisberg, are skeptical of Ragano's claim. Among those who believe it are G. Robert Blakey, Justice Department veteran and chief counsel to the House Assassination

Committee, who says, "I have carefully studied his story and I think he is telling it as he remembers it." But that is no surprise. Blakey 15 years ago said it was a "historical truth" that the mob—Trafficante and Marcello, in particular—killed Kennedy to get the administration off its back.

Washington lawyer Ron Goldfarb, who is completing a book on Robert Kennedy and organized crime, also takes Ragano seriously. "He's broke, he's looking to cash in on a book," says Goldfarb. "On the other hand, does what he says line up with other things you know are so? The answer to that is yes."

Ragano says he hasn't a clue about what happened in Dealey Plaza on the day Kennedy was shot.

"I think Santo was the brains, and I think Carlos carried it out. . . . Whenever we would talk about Carlos, Santo would always remind me that he had powerful friends in Texas, and he did have a man in Dallas, a Mafia figure who represented his interests there."

Ragano remembers a conversation that took place in a car with Marcello and Trafficante. The radio was on, he says, and they heard the news about New Orleans District Attorney Jim Garrison's loopy investigation of the assassination.

"Santo said, 'Carlos, mark my words, before this thing's over they're going to blame you and I for killing the president.' And I looked back there, and both of them looked like the cats that ate canaries. And I wondered at the time—I wondered why they'd make a statement like that."

Ragano says Marcello and Trafficante both knew Chicago Mafia boss Sam Giancana, who'd once had the same girlfriend as John F. Kennedy.

"Giancana felt, rightly or wrongly, that he was instrumental in bringing about the [1960] election," Ragano says. "Because there was only 118,000 votes, the smallest margin ever, and they felt they had a friend over there and they felt betrayed.

"And they were close, Santo and Giancana. . . . I would say all those guys had to know. I know they all felt they were double-crossed. But I don't think they could pull off something like this without some of those guys getting together and deciding on it."

Ragano says the plot might have begun in July 1963, when Hoffa, who hated the Kennedy brothers, told him: "Something has to be done. The time has come for your friend and Carlos to get rid of him, to kill that son of a bitch John Kennedy."

Ragano—only half-seriously, he says—carried the message—for the man they nicknamed *Marteduzzo,* which means little hammer. "Marteduzzo," he told them, "wants you to do a little favor for him." But, he writes, the reaction was odd: "Santo and Carlos exchanged glances. . . . Their facial expressions were icy. Their reticence was a signal that this was an uncomfortable subject."

"I don't think he could order those two guys to do anything," Ragano says, "but if they could lead Jimmy to think they did it because he ordered it, it would make the [Teamsters] pension fund more accessible. These are devious people, these are cunning people, they don't think the way we do, everything has double meanings.

"The whole motive revolves around one thing—forget everything else. The Teamsters pension fund. It all goes back to that—a billion dollars.

"So by killing Kennedy, Jimmy would be *beholden* to Carlos and Santo and they would have [guaranteed] access to that pension fund. They had the motive and obviously had the capability. When [the CIA] wanted to get rid of Castro, who did they turn to? Santo—not one of their own agents.

"I don't pretend to know how it happened," Ragano says, "but after I talked to Santo, four days before he died, all these pieces fell together. I could see the jigsaw puzzle."